

1843

HINDSIGHT

What Christmas Wasn't

By Jody Morgan

For the Pilgrims, who had left their homeland in order to worship without the trappings of secular traditions that they felt had contaminated the Catholic and Anglican churches, and for the Puritans, who sought to purge the Anglican church of those same practices, Christmas was not a day for celebration. Feasting, merry-making and the general excesses that went with the then-current English observation of the holiday were too reminiscent of the ancient Roman rites attending saturnalia. Call it a papist invention or the recreation of a pagan party, singing of yuletide treasure was not in tune with the beliefs of the first settlers of Plymouth and Boston.

As Duxbury evolved from a quiet community of subsistence farmers to an important center of shipbuilding, however, foreign influences began to alter the town's perspective. By the time Mary Rice was hired to teach at a private school in Duxbury in about 1840, the celebration of Christmas had been joyfully accepted by all three of the village churches. Her own family in Boston, however, had never adopted such a liberal attitude. Her description reveals: "I had never attended a Christmas service ... I had been so reared that it was not easy for me to become interested in Christmas. It signified nothing to me."

Instead of joining the friends who urged her to come with them to the Methodist meeting

she normally attended or the Unitarian service she occasionally visited, Mary Rice insisted on spending Christmas Eve of 1843 alone. She rationalized that work demanded her attention. But as the evening wore on, she became restless. Finally, thoroughly depressed, she decided to try a long walk in the fresh night air.

Leaving the house on the Point where she boarded, Mary walked all the way to the Unitarian Church. By the time the third meetinghouse had been demolished to make way for the 1840 structure that was Mary's first stop, Duxbury's First Parish had embraced the Unitarian faith. Probably taking her usual shortcut across "the Major's pasture" where Alden Street joins Tremont, Mary passed the lighted windows of the impressive new building and continued on her tramp.

The next assembly she passed without stopping was the Methodist meeting. Although Seth Sprague had donated the funding and site for the Methodist Episcopal Church completed in 1823, he had left the church in a rage when the 1836 conference of the parent organization had failed to take a stand against slavery. The structure, which is now St. John's Episcopal Church, was still occupied by part of the Methodist group in 1843. The larger portion of the congregation, however, had followed Seth Sprague and was meeting in the District I schoolhouse, located near the brook on Surplus Street. Their new

house of worship, now Pilgrim Church, was not constructed until 1844.

Continuing without a pause, Mary Rice recalls: "I reached the 'village,' and neared the Universalist church, which commanded a fine view of the sea, then at flood-tide." Where do you think she was?

A committee representing Duxbury's First Universalist Society had purchased a plot of land from Samuel Winsor in 1826. The group, represented by Joel Peterson, Bradford Holmes, H.B. Sampson, William Sampson and Joseph Bosworth, had come together for the first time the previous year. The building was taken down and moved in 1866. But on Christmas Eve of 1843, the Universalist Church stood where cars now park at the Winsor House Inn.

As Mary Rice paused to admire the view of moonlight on the water, the church door opened to admit a few latecomers. The message of the Christmas music that filled the air was completely new to her. Mary stepped inside. The fear that had darkened a childhood spent dwelling on the belief that many are called, but few are chosen, was dispelled by the repeated references to "peace on earth and goodwill to men."

The outcome of Mary Rice's pilgrimage that evening may be catalogued among the miracles of Christmas or possibly accepted simply as one of life's happier coincidences. At the end of her long walk through the cold, Mary found not only the hope she had been missing

in her own view of religion, but also the love of her life.

Not a wealthy body, the Universalists had frequently been unable to retain the services of a minister. Somehow, at this point in time, they had managed to engage a promising young preacher named Daniel Parker Livermore. His message, and perhaps his charm, captivated the teacher from Boston. Mary lingered after the service to ask for a copy of his Christmas sermon.

Unfortunately, Mary's family did not consider her newfound happiness to be a manifestation of divine love. "Friends forsook me, acquaintances ostracized me, I was disapproved by the church, and for a time my father was inconsolable." Despite their disapproval, Mary accepted the faith of the Rev. Livermore as well as his hand in marriage. Married on May 7, 1845, the Livermores took up residence in Fall River.

Today we welcome Christmas and all that it wasn't for Mary Rice and the founding fathers of both the Old Colony and the Bay Colony. But a part of their austere attitude lingers in Duxbury tradition. The rocking reindeer and flashing multi-color lights that caused the competing neighbors in my native New Jersey to add new wonders to their displays each year are absent. Candles glow in the windows as they may have in Mary Rice's day, and white lights recall the silver moonlight on the water, which caused her to pause by the Universalist Church on Christmas Eve.